

Advocates: What Did YOU Do on Your Summer Vacation?

By Lana Ajemian

The closing days of the school year typically bring with them an insane pace of year-end meetings, elections, installations, and well-deserved celebrations. Exhausting, right? Yet, at the same time, PTAs also begin to build the framework for the organizational work of the incoming PTA board and the next school year.

Before the school year ends

A critical part of the early organizational planning work involves appointing chairs and committees and transitioning the work from outgoing to incoming volunteers. In my experience, there is a great fear of assuming the legislation or advocacy chair position because of the amount of information volunteers think they need to know. I can say this with confidence because I was one of those people. However, with the assurances and promises of help from a supportive region director, I was appointed as legislation chair for our region of more than 340 PTA units and councils without having any experience whatsoever in this arena. I quickly found out that if you have the interest and the passion, the learning comes and the love of the job grows.

Another organizational task that needs to be considered in the last part of the school year is to ensure you allot funds in the proposed budget for your advocacy work; toolkits, events, and travel to attend conferences that inform and support advocacy efforts are vital to the role. Depending upon the size of your PTA, advocacy activities could include the following:

- Hosting legislative breakfasts, meetings, and forums
- Preparing and disseminating information on education and child welfare issues
- Hosting or attending a statewide legislation conference
- Training members to lobby at all levels of government
- Holding leadership training events

- Kicking off the school year by sending a brief electronic survey to assess membership's advocacy priorities and needs

Remember that, expenditures for training and conference attendance not only are legitimate, but also support and empower your volunteers to do their job. An educated, well-trained advocacy leader will be your voice on critical issues.

When summer starts

Although your PTA year may be winding down, your legislators may not be done with their session. If this is what happens in your state, pay attention! It is in those final weeks just before summer recess that bills often get pushed through with additional provisions intended to garner bipartisan support. For example, PTAs throughout New York had to go on high alert when the state legislature considered a last-minute push to pass legislation to cap school spending increases. Sitting in a blistering hot hotel plaza at the National PTA Convention and Exhibition in San Diego, the New York delegates were on our cell phones calling our leadership back home and setting up phone chains for everyone to contact their representatives. While the bill never made it to the floor for a vote that year, it was a close call and a lesson learned; it is important to be ready to act at the end of a legislative session and throughout the summer in the event a special session is called.

During the heart of summer

As the Fourth of July ebbs by, visions of PTA may fade into the background. If your PTA is like New York PTA, you may be called to a summer leadership conference where you'll mix cold drinks and relaxation with an exploration of education, health, and child welfare issues to guide your advocacy efforts. Our summer leadership conferences

(Top right) PTA cofounder Alice McLellan Birney; (Inset) The first board of managers of the National Congress of Mothers in Washington DC, February 17, 1897. The two women front and center are Alice Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst.



are intended to provide training and informational workshops for novice and seasoned PTA leaders in a fun, relaxed environment. Attendees are enriched by the opportunity to learn from experienced PTA leaders as well as our education and child advocacy partners. At last summer's conference, we rolled out The "L" (Legislation) Word workshop, specifically designed as a primer for new legislation chairs and interested volunteers. The goal of our summer conference is for PTA advocates to leave empowered, charged, and ready to begin thinking about their goals for the year ahead.

Legislative chairs should be encouraged to take time during summer recesses to visit the state and national legislators in their local offices to introduce themselves and say thanks for actions they may have taken that align with PTA values. The chairs may also have the opportunity to discuss concerns or to educate a legislator on a PTA position. Such visits offer PTA advocates a chance to establish a relationship with their representatives, offer assistance on education and family issues, and leave their contact information.

Late summer

It is late summer, and leaders are appointed, a budget line is ready to be proposed, your members have received a wrap-up of the year's legislation affecting children and schools in the upcoming year, summer training and visits are done, and you have begun your advocacy calendar planning. Somewhere in the midst of all this you managed to fit in some fun family time and leisure pursuits.

You may wonder, did summer really happen? When you do, think about what you have accomplished. Remember that you have prepared yourself to lead others through a new season of advocacy. **OC**

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Critical steps to igniting your advocacy year

1. Find someone with the passion to do the job.
2. Allot funds in the proposed budget for your advocacy work.
3. Keep your eye on key legislation to the end of your state's legislative session for actions that could happen before recess or in a special session.
4. Hold a summer leadership conference to plan strategy and bring new leaders up to speed on their duties and your advocacy priorities.
5. Encourage legislation chairs to meet with their state and national legislators while they are at in their home districts during legislative recess.

Summer advocacy: A proud PTA tradition

It is a sultry July afternoon on lovely Lake Chautauqua in Western New York. While the children are off fishing with their fathers, a group of women sit in their Adirondack chairs sipping refreshing lemonade "coolers" and sharing their ideas about raising families, trends in education (the nearly 8-hour-long 8th grade exit exam in Kansas!), and the local and national political and social scene.

The year was 1895, and this group of enthusiastic, concerned women drawn together for a summer retreat by Alice McLellan Birney was the first gathering of child advocates for education and social reform from which sprang the National Congress of Mothers—today's PTA. Conversations and ideas shared over those warm, pastoral days launched the largest campaign to improve the lives of children and families in the United States.

Just as these women took the time to meet and discuss their ideas during summer and, in turn, inspired Alice Birney to bring them to fruition, our PTA advocacy continues year-round—it is an ever-changing landscape that knows no season.

For more information

National PTA's 2012 federal public policy agenda, online advocacy toolkit, and much more is available at PTA.org/public_policy.asp.